

John Peter Altgeld: Representative of the Working Man

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Governor John Peter Altgeld was a reasonably well-known man in Illinois because he was involved in many labor disputes including the Haymarket Square Riot of 1886 and the Pullman Strike of 1894. Governor Altgeld was an advocate for the working man and did what he thought was right even when it jeopardized his political career. Governor Altgeld once said, "I do not know how I will act, but I will do what I think is right."

Peter Altgeld was born in Germany on December 30, 1847, and died in Joliet, Illinois, on March 12, 1902. Altgeld came to the United States as a baby, brought over by his parents to Ohio. At sixteen, Altgeld joined the Union Army and served until the end of the American Civil War. After that he worked as a common laborer and then became a schoolteacher.

Altgeld then studied law and became a lawyer. He advocated prison reform and wrote *Our Penal Machinery and its Victims* in 1884. He was then elected a judge of the superior court of Cook County (1886-1891) and became its chief justice. Altgeld began his political career around 1884 when Grover Cleveland was first elected president. Altgeld was a member of the Democratic Party. He was elected governor in 1893 and served one term to 1897.

When Governor Altgeld said, "I do not know how I will act, but I will do what I think is right," he was referring to his review of the Haymarket Square Riot anarchists' request for clemency. Almost as soon as he was elected governor, Altgeld began getting visitors and memos asking for the pardon of Oscar Neebe, Samule Fielden, and Michael Schwab. Among their advocates were Clarence Darrow and Judge Samuel P. McConnell. These men tried to convince Altgeld that, even though it would jeopardize his prospects for becoming a senator, it was the right thing to do and that Altgeld should not take his political career into consideration. Altgeld found that these attempts to sway him in his decision were unnecessary and the criticisms to his willingness to do his duty intolerable.

After careful analysis of the trial of the three men, Altgeld found that the convictions of Oscar Neebe, Samule Fielden, and Michael Schwab were unjust because the jury was packed, the jurors were not competent, and the trial judge did not grant a fair trial. He pardoned the three

men fully on June 26, 1893. Altgeld received much criticism from conservatives due to his decision.

Also in June 1893 the first major national union was formed: the American Railway Union (ARU). Its goal was to unite many different "craft" or "skill" unions. Many workers of the Pullman factory near Chicago joined the ARU. The formation of this union marked a turning point in Illinois labor history. The country's economy was failing in a depression and on Labor Day 1893 John Altgeld said, "Times will be getting even worse." John Altgeld decided to allow laid off laborers to compete among themselves for job opportunities; however, he added, "Let me say that it will be the duty of all public officials to see to it that no man is permitted to starve on the soil of Illinois." When strikes happened in Illinois, Governor Altgeld sent the state militia out to help control riots and protests in which people were using force or felt threatened.

A seemingly small incident started on May 11, 1894, when 2000 employees of the Pullman Company went on strike. The police did not request that state troops be sent to quell the protests. Governor Altgeld was ready to move upon the request of anyone who was endangered by the strikers and finally did send Illinois militia to free train cars held by the ARU boycott to show support to the Pullman strikers.

But there were false reports sent to Washington, D.C., by the General Managers Association of Chicago Railroads. At 3:30 P.M., July 3, 1894, upon President Cleveland's command, federal troops were sent to Chicago. Governor Altgeld was extremely insulted by the move of federal troops into Illinois without his consent or that of the Illinois legislature. The governor protested this movement of federal troops as unconstitutional. Soon after the deployment of federal troops Altgeld sent a telegram to Grover Cleveland saying, "... So far as I have been advised, the local officials have been able to handle the situation. But if any assistance were needed, the State stood ready to furnish 100 men for every one man required. . . . I Notwithstanding these facts, the Federal Government has been applied to by men who had political and selfish motives. . ." Altgeld felt that the Constitution was violated when federal troops were sent in without request. He considered this criminal.

Altgeld died at fifty-four. Throughout his life he did what he thought was right and often jeopardized himself through his liberal idealism. The main focus of his life was on his pardoning of the Haymarket anarchists and his involvement in Illinois labor history.

[From Harry Barnard, *Eagle Forgotten*; Rosemary Laughlin, *The Pullman Strike of 1894*.]